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Welcome to The Land!



[Lone Oak Hill](#)

(Photo by [David Chapple](#))

*This wiki is for the folks who were involved with the community called **The Land** on the San Andreas fault above Palo Alto, California in the early 1970s as well as [Struggle Mountain](#) and surrounding communities like [Black Mountain](#), [Rancho Diablo](#), [Pacific High School](#), [Stallings](#), etc. It is intended to be a piece of the rebirth of that community as a virtual gathering on the Web. The [About](#) page will help you learn what this site is trying to do and how you can participate. **If this is your first visit, please go there now.** Thanks!*

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The Land

"The 800 acres was located on Page Mill Road, down about a half a mile from Skyline Boulevard. Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl used the house to do 'peace training seminars'. The pastureland was leased out to a farmer for the grazing of his cattle. We asked Joan and Ira if we could use the land for living accommodations, 'structures' that wouldn't bother either the front house training seminars or the cattle. They said OK. We didn't bother with the owner at that time. This is how the first people moved to the land."

[Jim Kerr](#)



One version of The History Of The Land (There are some additional histories on the [histories](#) page.)

This is a piece done for the South Skyline Association a few years ago. It was written by Cliff Jenkins who had interviewed both [Purusha](#) and [Mark](#), and references many articles from the Palo Alto Times, (see [press clippings](#).)

It seems impossible to consider the history of the South Skyline area without addressing the issue of communes and communal living. Names such as Black Mountain, Rancho Diablo, Earth Ranch, Aquarian Valley, Pacific High, Stallings and Struggle Mountain come to mind. To my mind, however nothing so symbolizes attempts at communal living on skyline as The Land. The Land was located on some 750 acres of land, east and south of Page Mill Road (32100 Page Mill Rd.), on what is now the Montebello Open Space Preserve.

Rumor has it that all of the property which included The Land, as well as what is now Struggle Mountain, was purchased in the 1860s for a five-dollar gold piece. In the early 1900s, all of this land was purchased by Louis O'Neal, an important Republican politician from San Jose. O'Neal was a member of the Santa Clara County Republican League and hosted a number of significant political meetings in the so-called Long Hall, built adjacent to Page Mill Road. It is said that a couple of California governors were annointed at meetings held in this structure. O'Neal also built a large house, several cabins, and a huge horse barn and planted a walnut orchard and vineyard, the latter removed during prohibition.

Here is a picture in the final hours of The Land taken in front of the Long Hall.



(photo by Ann Mason)

The O'Neal Foundation eventually sold 750 acres to Alyce Burns in the early 1950s. Her husband, Emmet Burns, was a disbarred attorney from Watsonville, where the family owned fruit orchards. The Burns succeeded in getting their land annexed by the city of Palo Alto in 1959, and water and sewage lines were brought up Page Mill and terminated across from the Burns land in 1962. Donald Eldridge bought the 750 acre Page Mill property from the Burns in 1969 for over two million dollars, including a down payment of \$600,000, for which he took immediate title to 150 acres. Eldridge was a millionaire by virtue of his patents on several color video processes, and he was interested in environmental issues and causes. After Eldridge purchased the property, he reached an agreement with [Joan Baez](#) and [David Harris](#) of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence (ISNV) that they could use the land for meetings and conferences and would in return provide informal caretaker and security services to combat the motorcyclists and four-wheelers who had been trashing the property. The ISNV developed a spring for water, installed a septic system near Page Mill Road, and set up the Long Hall for meetings. There is some irony in the fact that a former Republican enclave was being used by leftists for meetings on nonviolence. Early in 1970, a garden and schism developed simultaneously. the disagreement arose between the more serious, purposeful ISNV members and a recently-arrived hippie contingent, which actively espoused freedom, dope, nudity, and a fairly relaxed lifestyle, not necessarily in that order. The conflict was carried by the hippie element, and ISNV withdrew to Menlo Park.

The recently-arrived hippies settled mostly in the backlands of the land, with a ridge between them and Page Mill Road. There they created a cookshack and 28 small cabins and developed a good spring. The backlanders had no power, no generator, and no septic system, but the comfort and architectural uniqueness of the dwellings seemingly made up for the primitive accoutrements. The original land-dwellers occupied the frontland cabins and Long Hall, where access to a septic system and electricity facilitated such luxuries as communal meetings of both frontlanders and backlanders in the horse barn. The population of The Land averaged some fifty people during the seven-and-a-half years of its existence, with a general swelling of numbers during the summer months. Governance tended to operate on the principle of consensus-building, leavened with an anti-authoritarian prohibition of bureaucrats, elected officials and politicians. Authoritarians tended to be weeded out after the initial disagreement within ISNV. New families had to be evaluated by the entire community, with special emphasis on the opinions of their prospective immediate neighbors. There were certain basic rules agreed upon by all: no fires, no firearms, no human waste left unburied. While the frontland had a septic system, the backland relied upon outhouses, and human waste disposal was a ongoing concern. By some accounts, garbage and refuse disposal difficulties plagued the land as well.

Consensus decision making seemed to be based on the Quaker Friend's meeting model, and people often stepped forward to volunteer for specific tasks as the need arose. The obvious weaknesses of this system were the time-consuming nature of decision making and the lack of a mechanism to enforce necessary but unpopular decisions. In 1972, Don Eldridge became disillusioned with the possibility that Palo Alto would purchase his land for an Upper Foothills Park, thus giving him a modest profit on his investment. Palo Alto had instituted an Open Space zoning ordinance in 1972, which had the effect of downzoning land in the foothills from one dwelling per acre to one dwelling per ten acres, and Eldridge claimed the city thus owned his land by virtue of inverse condemnation. Eldridge filed suit against Palo Alto to recover financial damages, but this suit was not decided until 1979. Eldridge had also suffered a number of personal and business reverses, which made his financial situation precarious, and the city's refusal to buy him out added to his difficulties.

One other significant development in 1972 was the formation of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (MROSD), with access to property tax funds and the right to condemn and acquire property in the Foothills. In 1973, the city of Palo Alto became aware of the illegal

development on the Land and moved to abate it. A number of Land residents gave a presentation to the Palo Alto City Council, and no further direct word was heard from Palo Alto during the remaining life of The Land. In February of 1974, Eldridge—who had been making annual payments to Burns amounting to a total of \$725,000—asked Burns, pursuant to the contract, to release title to the 241 acres for which Eldridge had already paid. Burns refused and foreclosed, and Eldridge went to court to block foreclosure and enforce the contract; the judge found for Burns. Burns reacquired the property, minus the original 150 acres, for the amount he was still owed (\$730,000) at a quiet auction. This court decision was ultimately reversed on appeal, but this did not transpire until after the demise of The Land community, a group whose continued tenure on the property was dependent on the tacit support of a sympathetic Eldridge. After Burns repossessed The Land after foreclosure in December of 1975, her family made several attempts, some of questionable legality, to evict the residents living there. Burns finally arranged a sale of the property to MROSD in 1977, with the understanding that it would become a part of Montebello Open Space Preserve and the requirement that all residents would be evicted before the Open Space District would take title. Court battles between Burns and The Land residents raged on, featuring, among other things, the stripping of Land residents of the right to a trial by jury and the ultimate finding that they were guilty of unlawful detainer with malice, with the eventual assessment against them of \$3,500 in damages all together. Land residents were also prevented by another three-judge panel from collecting aid under the California Relocation Act which protected persons who resided on property acquired by a public agency.

This judicial panel claimed that the residents did not meet the definition of "persons" under the law. On October 20, 1977, in the presence of members of the Burns family and officials of MROSD, Santa Clara County Sheriff's deputies evicted The Land residents, with scattered resistance. On December 1st of the same year, the same cast of characters, accompanied by eight Palo Alto police officers and a bulldozer, oversaw the destruction of most of the buildings, which were smashed by the bulldozers and covered by a thin layer of earth. On the frontlands, a garage and three vacant cottages were left standing; in the backlands, two vacant cabins were left, primarily because an Open Space District board member felt they might be preserved permanently as unoccupied monuments to the spirit of The Land. On December 10, 1977, an unknown person set fire to five of the remaining six buildings, and the physical saga of The Land was at an end. No story of The Land can be complete without mentioning the accidental drowning of [Sierra](#) Laurel Wesley Myers, two-year-old daughter of [Robyn Wesley](#) and [Kim Myers](#) of The Land and Struggle Mountain. Through the eight-day vigil that was kept at the bedside of the comatose and dying child, and through the burial of her ashes in the backlands in September of 1977, the unity of purpose and communal spirit of The Land residents was highlighted in stark relief.

Another incident associated with The Land occurred in 1995, when Rip King, former Land resident and noted TV producer, died suddenly in Taos, NM. Rip used to fashion little leather pouches, in which he would place several crystals, when he lived in his tepee on The Land. When old friends and former Land residents gathered at the tepee site for a memorial service that year, they intended to plant a couple of trees in honor of [Rip](#). The first shovel full of turned earth revealed a rotted leather pouch with a couple of crystals inside. It does seem as though the spirit of Rip and his cohorts is indeed invincible and the spirit of The Land lives on in the hearts of the people who were there and the imagination of those who supported them.

One final note, in the words of former Land Dwellers [Rio Burns](#) and Sally Edgecombe (and probably others): "Can land be privately owned, or does it belong to all, since all were born on it? How far into the earth does ownership go? Does it include bugs? Or Snow? Wildflowers? Air and light? Rocks and dirt? Or the cubic feet of air above it? How high up do you own the sky? How deep into the earth—all the way? Or does ownership mean the right to use it or not use it? The right to control its future? Decide how it will be developed? What about the thousands of years before the land knew us? A tree suddenly light with blossoms. The smell of rain. A passage of deer. the earth is our holy parent. It knows nothing of buy and sell, of trespass or title, but responds as always to seed, with fruit. To own it properly is to live on it with honor and reverence."



The Land in flowers created by Willie Nelson in the Front Lands garden
(photo by Court Tefft)

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